

Crisis, Dispossession, and Activism to Reclaim Detroit

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The theme of a 2013 gathering of philosophers at Ioannina, Greece, was “Crisis,” and certainly there are reasons to focus upon that theme. The Greek economy and political system were under strain. While the government implemented austerity measures, Greek citizens took to the streets to defend their jobs, pensions, and way of life. At the same time, in Detroit, city services were drastically cut. The city had to apply for a federal grant to hire back some of the fire fighters it had laid off due to budget constraints. Schools were being closed as an unelected Emergency Manager (and he appointed by the state’s Governor) took over the purse strings and decision making of the city schools. Since then, the Emergency Manager of Detroit had the city declare bankruptcy, and Judge Rhodes agreed with the plan to reduce the city’s debt by giving the largest creditors vast landholdings in the city, in exchange for forgiveness of some of the debt.

Many Detroiters took to the streets to protest their dispossession.¹ But the concept of “crisis” is sometimes used and abused by capitalist opportunists and political manipulators, who see, in peoples’ temporary paralysis and confusion during a crisis, an opportunity for quick gains. “Crisis” can, therefore, be problematic. Yes, it can be an “opportunity” as the popular saying goes, but for whom?

In their recent book, Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou discuss the concept of dispossession in all its complexity, in the context of enforced austerity measures in Europe and a global Occupy movement.² Such reflections on dispossession are relevant to understanding the Israeli takeover of Palestinian lands and Palestinian acts of resistance, the landless peasant movements in Brazil and other parts of Latin America (El Movimiento Sin Tierra), and many other movements throughout the world. In the United States, discussion of dispossession clearly applies to the immigrant and border crisis on the U.S. and Mexico border. But, in this paper, I will use their reflections as a springboard for analysis of the imposition of an Emergency Manager on the City of Detroit and the subsequent bankruptcy hearings for the city, which, along with the mortgage and foreclosure crisis, and now recent water shut-offs, have resulted in dispossessing the poorest of the poor from their modest possessions. However, Detroit is also the scene of a robust response, as people take to the streets in acts of solidarity to demand their city back. As Athena and Butler caution, activists should not fall into reinforcing the disastrous concept of per-

¹ See G. Presbey, “Globalization and the Crisis in Detroit,” *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology*, 15 (2015), 261-277.

² J. Butler and A. Athanasiou, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (Cambridge, Mass.: Polity, 2013).

sonhood reinforced by possession. There are other ways of engaging with each other politically to forge a common cause that escape the negative aspects of “possession.”

Athena Athanasiou starts out the book’s discussion with a careful critique of the concept of the “liberal self,” understood as autonomous and impermeable. Instead, we humans have a fundamental dependency upon one another. This dependence can leave us open to pain and injury, but it can also enable us to do much if we can coordinate our efforts with others (2). Judith Butler agrees with this critique, and points out that the concept of “dispossession” clarifies how we actually depend on others in a sustained social world, that in fact the self is social (4). These ideas are not new; Aristotle referred to humans as political (or social) animals, and pointed out that humans organized themselves into social units in order, not only to survive bodily, but to thrive and find human fulfilment. Contemporary communitarians like Alisdair MacIntyre also have explained that acknowledging our vulnerability to injury, and our dependence on each other, is a necessary step in our taking stock of reality and our insight into what it means to be human.³

Athanasiou explains that all of our lives have some precarity; we are all exposed to dangers of injury, violence, and indebtedness. However, in our contemporary world with systemic racism, the logic of dispossession is mapped onto our bodies (18-19). Butler confirms Athena’s point with reference to Orlando Patterson’s study of the “social death” involved in slavery, as well as Achille Mbembe’s discussion of those left to die through negligence, or Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s study of those (as in California’s African American and Latino youths who struggle with unemployment, and end up disproportionately in prison) who must live with a higher risk of mortality (19). She adds that this notion of “precarity” is aimed at a certain population or demographic, which is told that it has no choice but to become acclimatized to insecurity. Such persons receive the message that they are expendable or are fully abandoned. They have a damaged sense of their future, and are more likely to experience illness, or even mortality (43).

Unfortunately, it is all too easy to find examples of this kind of treatment of Detroiters and of other African American city populations in Michigan. Infant mortality among African Americans in the state is very high. Life expectancy is dramatically lower for African Americans. The incinerator located in Detroit brings with it higher asthma rates for Detroit’s children. It is easier, both financially and socially, for white Michiganders to move out of African-American majority cities and neighborhoods to places with lower crime and violence rates. White populations, thereby, for the most part insulate themselves from the levels of precarity experienced in the cities and neighborhoods. But, even if white Michiganders move into Detroit, in search of art, music, culture, or the new housing developments there, they may still be able to insulate themselves by concentrating on living in and recreating in the are-

³ A. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (The Paul Carus Lectures) (Chicago: Open Court, 2001).

as of the city given inordinate resources, such as more policing, better working street lights, and more grocery stores.

But not all white Americans coming to Detroit do so to seek out the insular experience. Some come especially to be in solidarity with those struggling to survive. These (often young) people seek out the neighborhoods where they, to a great extent willingly, share in the precarity of their neighbors –although, due to being citizens, they may not fear being taken out of their beds in the middle of the night by ICE agents as are some of their neighbors. Some of these new Detroiters come to grow food and community, and to grow food through growing community, and vice versa. They care about their neighbors' kids and do not want them to be gobbled up by a prison industrial complex. Judith Butler calls this "being solicited out of oneself," and she sees it described in the philosophical works of Maurice Blanchot and Emmanuel Levinas (71).

Whether we find them in the cities or the suburbs, and whatever race they may be, Butler and Athanasiou caution us not to capitulate to current narrow ideas of the "good life" that revolve around "property ownership, commodity fetishism, consumer excitement, securitarian regimes, national belonging, bourgeois self-fashioning, and bio-political normalcy" (30-31). In other words, if one owns or rents a condominium guarded by a private security firm, with fences and alarm systems, in a neighborhood with close access to shopping, dining, and entertainment choices, while asserting a middle class patriotic gender-conforming identity, the real "good life" might still elude you.

How can we understand the bodies of protestors moving themselves to a position of blockading the business of dispossession? Such bodies, Butler notes, clearly have some kind of "presence," and Athanasiou adds that such political activism makes "present" a hidden, or taken-for-granted, normative and hegemonic understanding of person, property, and propriety (14-15). Athanasiou gives as an example Rosa Parks, who refused to move out of her bus seat, and, thereby, resisted the neoliberal assignment of her to a precarious place (that is, as African American, she might at any moment have to give up her seat on the bus to a white person) (21-22). But both Athanasiou and Butler are careful to ensure that such acts of presence are not interpreted as acts of agency of an independent self, cut off from and not beholden to others. It will be self-defeating to try to counter dispossession by asserting robust possession in the individualist vein (33-37). And, they do not want metaphors of "movement" to marginalize those who are not able-bodied.

Baxter Jones has been wheelchair-bound since he suffered an auto accident in 2005. But that has not stopped him from being active in the Occupy Detroit Movement, as well as a member of their Eviction Defense Committee. He, himself, lost his house after his injury led to the loss of his job.⁴ More recently, he was one of 19 people who blockaded the entrance to Homrich, a company that had won a \$5.7 million contract to shut off the water to houses that were in arrears of paying their bills. The group of blockaders included

⁴ "Baxter Jones," "Voices from Detroit: Life Without Water," *Circle of Blue*.

folks of many different backgrounds, all committed to ensuring that all Detroiters received water they needed for hygiene and health. Over 18,000 families had their water turned off. While the Water Department insists that three-fourths of these families had water restored within 48 hours, that leaves many people with a lack of services. Many face large bills for service and little way to pay. In some cases, responsible, rent-paying tenants suffer as unresponsive landlords leave bills unpaid. In other cases, the Water Department's own records are faulty, and they were, for the most part, unreachable. Those who did reach them were told that payment "plans" were only available to those who paid at least a third of their bill in cash up front. There was no relief for those who had no way to pay.

Those who gathered to engage in civil disobedience at Homrich explained their rationale for choosing that site. They asked, why did the Emergency Manager decide to solve the seeming insolvency of the Water Department by hiring a company whose only capacity was to shut off the water to individual residences? After all, the forty largest businesses owed more to the Water Department than all of the rest of the residences did. But the Emergency Manager did not contract with any company who had the ability to collect from those corporate accounts. Rather, they contracted with a company that aimed at those who lived in poverty. Homrich and the Water Department emphasized that Homrich workers did not only turn off people's water, but their job was also to turn water back on (and, thus, they charged protestors with prohibiting their workers from turning people's water back on). This was surely a ploy to paint the protestors in a bad light. In reality, those who protested did so to help others who needed water, and so, with their own bodies, they tried to prevent a disaster.

Many involved invoked the memory of Charity Hicks, a mother who had resisted the shut off of her home's water, noting that she had not been properly notified by the Water Department. Police arrested her for obstructing the process of her water being shut off. Charity Hicks was someone who could get angry, but she was also someone who emphasized the importance of finding motivation to action in one's love of people, not anger. She channeled her energy for societal change by traveling to New York City as part of an effort to draw the U.N.'s attention to the water shut-offs.⁵ Activists convinced U.N. workers that the shut-offs were a violation of people's human rights. Tragically, while in New York City, Charity Hicks was knocked unconscious, and then died, due to a hit and run driver.⁶

Back in 1962, C.B. Macpherson's study of "possessive individualism" of the European Enlightenment (especially as articulated in Hobbes and Locke) showed how concepts of full personhood were based on the white male who was a property owner. In fact, if there was no property, there was no "individ-

⁵ M. Lukács, "Detroit's Water War: a tap shut-off that could impact 300,000 people," *The Guardian*, June 25, 2014 (<http://www.theguardian.com/environment/true-north/2014/jun/25/detroits-water-war-a-tap-shut-off-that-could-impact-300000-people>).

⁶ "Remembering Charity Hicks, Fallen Water Warrior," *Earth First Journal/Newswire*, July 12, 2014 (<http://earthfirstjournal.org/newswire/2014/07/12/remembering-charity-hicks-fallen-water-warrior/>).

ual,” Butler notes. Frank Cunningham has recently re-introduced Macpherson’s insights with our current moment in history in mind. Since his article, written in 2000, Cunningham has explained that Macpherson was critical of encouraging people to consider themselves as “owners” of their “powers.” This ontological understanding of self is at the core of capitalism’s possessive-individualist ontology. After all, inequalities constrain work choices. But, if I conceive of myself as possessing the right to freely exchange my work power for wages, the coercion involved in constraining circumstances is out of view. However, Macpherson did not advocate communitarianism, because he did not conceive of people belonging to discrete communities. Rather, he was an advocate of developmental individualism (instead of possessive individualism). According to Cunningham, Macpherson’s neo-Aristotelian ethic was that everyone should receive the resources they need to develop and exercise their powers. That means we each would have a right to expect others to help us to develop and exercise those powers, and that, reciprocally, we should help others to develop and exercise their powers as well. He called this view developmental individualism, in contrast to possessive individualism, which had as its emphasis the right to exclude others from the use of some property, and emphasized negative liberty, that is, freedom from obligation.⁷

In the context of Dewey and American Philosophy, James Albrecht elucidates a perspective on the self, similar to that of Cunningham and Macpherson. Albrecht describes this nuanced position of “individualism,” understood as inherent relationality. The “self,” according to William James, Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Dewey and Ralph Ellison, can only be understood in relation to community. As Albrecht explains, the pluralist metaphysics of James and Dewey, convinced that the classical liberal idea of the self is false, understands experience as the result of mutually transforming interactions, contingent and in flux. The relational concept of self makes sense of the need for our engaging in collective efforts of reform.⁸

And now, what about global crisis? Because, indeed, as William Robinson states, “We face a global crisis that is unprecedented in terms of its magnitude, its global reach, the extent of ecological degradation and social deterioration, and the scale and means of global violence.”⁹ With fears of collapse and/or social control looming, certainly our global capitalist world is, as Robinson says, unstable and crisis-prone. And yet, capitalist companies are known to use “crisis” to reinforce their control and/or to seize an opportunity for vast profits.¹⁰ And so, to a certain extent, we must remain calm and cool-headed in

⁷ F. Cunningham, “Democratic Theory and Racist Ontology,” *Social Identities*, 6 (2000), 463-82, esp. pp. 465 and 474-75.

⁸ J.M. Albrecht, *Reconstructing Individualism: A Pragmatic Tradition from Emerson to Ellison* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).

⁹ W.I. Robinson, *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Humanity* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 1.

¹⁰ See, for example, N. Gunerwardena and M. Schuller (eds.), *Capitalizing on Catastrophe: Neoliberal Strategies in Disaster Reconstruction* (Lanham, MD: Altamira/Rowman and Littlefield, 2008).

a crisis, and see the larger picture and the long term, so that we do not get frightened into making rash decisions.

Robinson thinks the current crisis in global capitalism is due to overaccumulation; that is, that world markets cannot absorb the products being produced by the world's workers and businesses. The reason for that underconsumption is the downward pressure on people's wages and the high unemployment which leaves so many people in our world unable to buy even their own necessities, let alone other consumer goods, since the recent economic crises. There is an inability or unwillingness of the current global economy and governments to incorporate the needs and wishes of the majority of humanity, who want meaningful work and human flourishing, and this leads, as well, to a social crisis.¹¹ This crisis is misdiagnosed as a problem of the U.S. government's unwillingness to do what it takes to ensure all of its' citizens' flourishing. According to Robinson, the U.S. government's actions show it to be a pawn of global "casino" capitalism. For example, ever since financial deregulation, global elites impact the world's economy in a predatory way, by growing the "speculation" economy instead of the productive economy.¹² In fact, current real estate practices, coupled with racism, have led to growing wealth gaps between white and black Americans, with banks recouping their losses while individuals are unable to save their homes from foreclosure.¹³

Detroit was fortunate to have a philosopher dedicated to pondering the deeply entrenched problems of the city. Grace Lee Boggs, who, after having received her Ph.D. in Philosophy from Bryn Mawr in 1940, pursued her interests in politics and justice, and came to Detroit where she married Jimmy Boggs, and the two of them devoted their lives to building community.¹⁴ She founded the Boggs Center, or more fully, the James and Grace Lee Boggs Center to Nurture Community Leadership (<http://boggscenter.org/>). This organization is tireless in both its activism to change the city, as well as in its incessant interrogation and discussion of the daily unfolding of the people's challenges and struggles in the city. But Boggs did not see herself merely as a problem solver. She wanted to build community, and nurture the individuals who make up that community. Boggs recently passed away at age 100 on October 5, 2015.

Many of the new programs springing up in Detroit started as ideas in the Boggs Center, or were directly or indirectly influenced by its philosophy of

¹¹ Robinson, p. 5.

¹² W. Robinson, "The Crisis of Global Capitalism," in M. Konings (ed.), *The Great Credit Crash* (London: Verso, 2010).

¹³ D. DeSilver, "Black incomes are up, but wealth isn't," PEW Research Center, August 30th, 2013 (<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/08/30/black-incomes-are-up-but-wealth-isnt/>).

¹⁴ For more, see G.M. Presbey, "Portrait of a Contemporary American Revolutionary: Grace Lee Boggs," *Radical Philosophy Review*, 17 (2014), 477-485, a review of G. Lee Boggs, *The Next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the Twenty-First Century* (2011) and Film, *American Revolutionary: The Evolution of Grace Lee Boggs*. Director: Grace Lee, LeeLee films, 2013.

societal transformation. But there are also a lot of independent players and not all of the projects can be attributed to Boggs herself or the Boggs Center. There is always a question of funding for start-up costs for projects. Shall the self-reliance movement rely on its own sources for start-up money? Or can it take contributions from the government or private foundations? If it takes money from others, how will these start-up projects be able to protect themselves from the undue influence of the donors in the shaping and running of its programs?

Let's first look at education. Detroit Summer, which has run for many years, was a direct project of the Boggs Center. The idea was to have youth engage in learning activities through coordinating volunteer teachers in the summer, and, thereby, to avoid the "summer slump" which happens to all students. This is much worse for low income students, when they lack educational opportunities in the summer. In the summer of 2012, their programs were sponsored by The Youth Connection, which is a local nonprofit, and funded by the National Summer Learning Association.¹⁵

Now, the Boggs Center is incubating another educational project, the Boggs Educational Center Charter School. This is an interesting development, because, for a long time, activists involved with the Boggs Center were against charter schools as alternatives to the public school system, arguing that charter schools were, for the most part, corporations that had profit as their goal. They lured the best students away from the public school system, leaving the public schools with an unruly and underachieving student body that would be neglected. Also, charter schools did not have to pay unionized faculty who had job security like those in Detroit Public Schools, meaning that teachers could be underpaid so that the charter school could make profits. Despite this criticism of charter schools, the public school situation in Detroit seems mired in problems. The few schools that served as promising alternatives to business as usual, such as Catherine Ferguson Academy (which had a thriving urban gardens program for its pregnant and young mothers), were radically altered, or closed altogether, under the Emergency Manager law.

In this context, the Boggs Educational Center decided to take advantage of procedures for setting up charter schools in order to open a school of its own, based on the pedagogy of John Dewey and Paolo Freire. Young teachers, disillusioned with the Detroit Public Schools or unemployed, became teachers in a school that uses radical pedagogy (boggseducationalcenter.org/). In a city with 47 percent functional illiteracy, where three-quarters of the youth do not graduate high school, and with a city having faced a \$300 million deficit (in 2009), these dedicated teachers decided to open a school devoted to "nurture-[ing] creative, critical thinkers who are empowered to contribute to the well-being of their communities."¹⁶ Community will be the students' classroom,

¹⁵ D. Sands, "Detroit Summer Learning Connection Creates Clearinghouse for Summer Youth Programs," *HuffPost Detroit*, (www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/05/24/detroit-summer-learning-connection-youth-program-camp_n_1543679.html).

¹⁶ Mission Statement, Boggs Educational Center (<http://boggseducationalcenter.org/mission-and-principles>).

the founders of this school assert. They call it “place based education.” Literacy will not just be measured by tests, since literacy is “a skill that goes beyond competence in reading and writing and includes media, technology, and even our emotions.” This ability to communicate in all these ways will overcome the muteness our society exercises when it comes to youth of color. The project team for starting the school consisted of Julia Putnam, who attended Detroit Summer as a teenager in 1992 and is a writer, Amanda Rosman, who uses her law background to help the school get chartered, and Marisol Teachworth, an activist and ESOL teacher. The school opened in the Fall of 2013, and completed its first year of teaching, not without some challenges, but, overall, it has worked well and has now been in operation for three years.¹⁷

The Boggs Center has given a lot of support to the urban garden movement in Detroit. Given the high unemployment rates and lack of nutrition, as well as the available vacant land, the urban gardening movement has taken off in Detroit. For example, Brightmoor, an area in Northwest Detroit to which many interested in urban gardening have moved, has 7,737 houses, down 1,602 units from 1990. It has an eleven percent vacancy rate of standing houses. Almost half of houses in Brightmoor are financed with subprime mortgages, and almost half of Brightmoor residents pay more than thirty percent of their income for housing.¹⁸ However, those interested in urban gardening on vacant lots have not been allowed to buy more than one adjacent lot, since the city government will only sell to those who say that they will build in-fill housing. So, farmers squat on land that they do not own, which falls short of sustainable standards.

At the same time that the city drags its feet when it comes to passing legislation or engaging in practices to encourage urban gardens, in a park, downtown private funders have created, from a torn-down historic building, Lafayette Greens, funded by Compuware and designed by Kenneth Weikal Landscape Architecture, a downtown city block re-creating a Disneyland-style mock urban garden, at least tipping its hat to the idea that Detroit is becoming famous for its urban gardening movement.¹⁹ One of the newest and very beautiful parks in Detroit, the development of the riverfront, was likewise funded by private donors. The Detroit Riverfront Conservancy gets donations from individuals and corporations.

¹⁷ See a series of stories on the new school. Z. Rosen, “Making an Education Vision Real in Detroit,” *State of Opportunity*, Michigan Radio, 20-6-2014 (<http://stateofopportunity.michiganradio.org/post/making-education-vision-real-detroit>); Z. Rosen, “Order in the classroom! New school works to craft a meaningful discipline policy that works,” *State of Opportunity*, Michigan Radio, 16-10-2013 (<http://stateofopportunity.michiganradio.org/post/order-classroom-new-school-works-craft-meaningful-discipline-policy-works>).

¹⁸ “A Basic Community Profile: Brightmoor” (<http://ssw.umich.edu/public/currentprojects/goodneighborhoods/BrightmoorBasicCommProfFinal.pdf>).

¹⁹ J. Helms-Day, “Lafayette Greens Urban Garden is Blooming in Downtown Detroit,” 29-8-2011 (www.examiner.com/article/lafayette-greens-urban-garden-is-blooming-downtown-detroit).

The project of getting people together at the grassroots, knowing each other, finding strength in leaning on each other, finding confidence to challenge the status quo that is tearing communities apart –that is the activism that is ongoing in Detroit.